

Chapter 1

Introduction

The City's sixth Comprehensive Plan continues over 50 years of comprehensive planning for Williamsburg. As has been the case for each plan, the 2006 Comprehensive Plan updates and refines the work done on earlier plans.

Perhaps the best introduction for this first Comprehensive Plan of the 21st century is the introduction for the 1953 Plan, which was the first plan for the 20th century:

Williamsburg is chiefly notable because it is a city with a most unique and important history. The city plan described in this report is recognition that it is a city which should look forward to a significant future also.

City planning has come to be an accepted municipal activity of American cities. Its objective is the development of the most satisfactory and desirable community possible in relation to the city's site and economic potential. This is to be achieved through a gradual correction of past mistakes in city building and a careful control of new growth. The city plan is a diagram or blueprint, carefully designed, indicating the most logical arrangement of the community's major features - streets, schools, parks, sewers, residential areas, commercial centers and the like. As existing buildings or facilities are replaced or new buildings are added, coordination of each with the city plan will, in the end, result in an economical, efficient and desirable community for its citizens and an attractive city to visit. Any other method of city building inevitably will result in duplication, waste, and costly mistakes in the expenditure of both public and private funds.

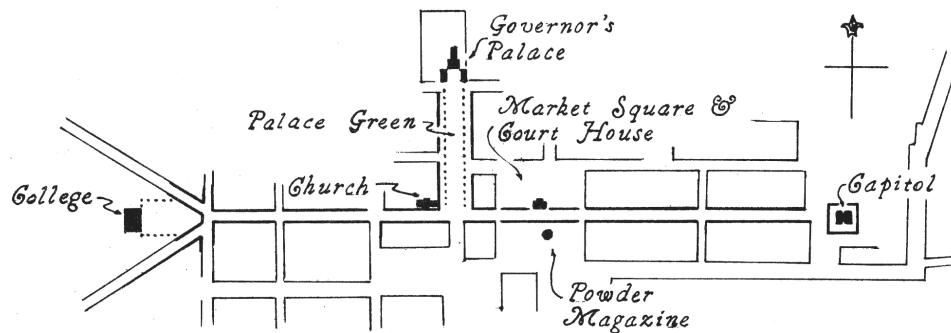
To build a community in accordance with a city plan results in a city with far more desirable living and working conditions at a material saving of time, effort and money.

Planning problems in Williamsburg are far more intricate and difficult than in the usual city of its size. The many thousands of visitors require accommodations and create traffic difficulties. Substantial growth is occurring. Present problems must be solved and future growth accommodated in such a manner that the city may be a completely satisfactory place in which to live and work and so that the notable restoration of the colonial city may be even more enjoyably and profitably viewed by increasing numbers of visitors. The lesson taught by this Restoration is important to the enhancement of national pride in the origins of our nation, thus making the planned development of the entire community of Williamsburg a matter of more than local importance.

Perhaps now more than ever Williamsburg needs to preserve its historic center while at the same time encouraging new development of compatible scale and character. As with the 1953, 1968, 1981, 1989 and 1998 Comprehensive Plans, the challenge will not end with the adoption of this Plan, but will continue through revisions of the zoning ordinance and other measures implementing the recommendations of the Plan.

Although the 1953 Comprehensive Plan was the first formal plan adopted under the procedures of State law, it was definitely not the City's first plan. The planning of Williamsburg began some 320 years earlier in 1633 by decree of the Virginia General Assembly, which designed a plan to encourage a new settlement at Middle Plantation as a defense in depth for Jamestown with high ground, better drainage, good water, and more central to the growing colony, out of the range of a ship's guns, and, perhaps, somewhat less vulnerable to plagues of mosquitoes from the marshes surrounding Jamestown.

The decision to move the Capitol and establish the City of Williamsburg followed the burning of the State House in Jamestown in 1698. The 1699 act authorizing the new city provided for several features of a city plan, including street names and setback regulations. By the time Williamsburg reached its prime as the colonial capital of Virginia, it had achieved the formal organization originally intended. The sketch below is taken from the famous Frenchman's Map of 1782.



The new capital flourished for eighty-one years. Though its resident population probably never exceeded 2,000, the town would be filled to overflowing during the "Publick Times", usually in the Spring and Fall, when the Assemblies were held and the courts were in session. But the population was moving westward, and the strategic Virginia Peninsula was vulnerable to attack. In 1780, the capital moved from Williamsburg to Richmond. The removal of the capital began a period of physical decline which continued unchecked until 1926 when Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., decided to fund and oversee the Restoration. The results of this decision are now familiar to millions of Americans.

All of the City's Comprehensive Plans have recognized that the Colonial heart of the City could neither be properly preserved nor made conveniently accessible without careful consideration of a much wider area. In addition, when official planning work began in 1951, it was apparent that the then recent trend of growth would continue around the old City, as it has to this day. The completion of Route 199 around the western side of the City and the resulting development has added to the existing growth pressures, and will continue to make preserving the City's character a great challenge.

With this in mind, the 2006 Comprehensive Plan has concentrated much effort on preserving the character of the Center City – the restored Historic Area, the College of William & Mary and the surrounding older neighborhoods, on providing an appropriate balance of housing for all City residents, and on encouraging appropriate new development – both in the two Economic Development areas (High Street and Quarterpath) and in redevelopment areas along the major commercial corridors. Much emphasis has also been placed on quality urban design and sensitivity to Williamsburg's natural environment. Urban design standards have been developed, and sensitive environmental areas have been identified throughout the City. Recommendations are made in the Implementation chapter to ensure that a strong relationship continues between this Plan and the implementation measures that will follow.

We have taken steps in this Plan to provide for orderly growth with sensitivity to both the natural and built environments. As the Historic Triangle prepares to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Jamestown, we should never lose sight of this area's, and Williamsburg's, place in history and should always take appropriate steps to ensure that Williamsburg does not lose its special character.

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